



People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Council Chamber, The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester NN12 6AD on Tuesday 21 February 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Rosie Herring (Chair)
Councillor Harry Barrett
Councillor Raymond Connolly
Councillor Rufia Ashraf
Councillor Greg Lunn
Councillor Emma Roberts
Councillor Sue Sharps
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
Councillor Mike Warren

Substitute Members:

Councillor Wendy Randall (substituting for Councillor Janice Duffy)

Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Karen Cooper
Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
Councillor Janice Duffy

Officers:

Ashley Leduc, Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance
Ben Pearson, Assistant Director Education
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer
Rebecca Wilshire, Deputy Director of Children's Services
Belinda Green, Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits
Gill Spencer, Transformation Delivery Manager

90. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies were received from Councillors Chowdhury, Cooper and Duffy. Apologies were also received from the Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Wellbeing and Health Integration and from the Executive Director People Services.

91. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

92. **Notification of requests from Members of the Public to address the Meeting**

There were none.

93. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting on 8 December 2022 as an accurate record.

Matters arising on the minutes

Minute 87 Integrated Care Northamptonshire

The Chair advised that information requested by the Committee on the resources available to Local Area Partnerships had been circulated to Committee members. The Chair had written to the Chief Constable of Northamptonshire Police regarding updating crime reporting areas to reflect West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) ward boundaries but had not yet received a response.

94. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair expressed disappointment that it had not been possible to secure the attendance of the Regional Director from the Department for Education (DfE) at the current meeting to discuss matters relating academy schools. The invitation had initially been accepted and the option of remote attendance had been offered if necessary, but had then been declined at a late stage. This situation had been continuing for many months. The Chair had discussed it with the Leader of the Council and proposed to write to local MPs to highlight the matter and see if they could assist in getting the engagement sought.

At the Chair's invitation, the Assistant Director Education commented that this seemed an appropriate response. The request from the Committee went back to January 2022 and had not changed during this time. This raised the question why the invitation had been declined at short notice ahead of the current meeting.

A Committee member suggested that it might be more productive to raise this matter directly with the DfE and the Committee considered the best approach to take.

The Chair subsequently advised that proposed changes to WNC's Overview and Scrutiny arrangements discussed with councillors in December 2022 had been presented to the Democracy and Standards Committee on 12 January 2023 as part of a wider report that had ultimately been deferred. The next meeting of the Committee was on 9 March 2023.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to write to the Department for Education and local MPs regarding the difficulties experienced in relation to its request to meet with the Regional Director.

95. **Debt and Money Advice Transformation Project**

The Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits introduced the report, which was intended to provide an update on the progress and direction of the transformation project to create a common Debt and Money Advice (DMA) service for all areas of West Northamptonshire that would provide effective support to members of the public.

The Transformation Programme Delivery Manager then presented an overview of the latest position of the DMA transformation project, highlighting the following points:

- Since the previous report to the Committee on 21 June 2022 the design phase of the project had been completed. This had involved taking information from councillors, service users, the existing in-house team, and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners; reviewing customer experiences of existing services; and other data analysis. This reflected the need to ensure that the future approach was evidence-based.
- The design phase had identified four possible options for future provision: continuing the existing approach; outsourcing the DMA service completely; moving the DMA service in-house; or using a hybrid approach involving both WNC and external providers.
- Continuing the existing approach was likely to represent a missed opportunity that would not reflect the overall direction being taken by WNC. The outsourced option would provide investment in the VCS, choice and capacity, whereas the in-house option would give greater central control that could assist with early intervention and reduce duplication. The hybrid option could provide some of the advantages of both but effective collaboration would be required to make it work.
- It was open to the Committee to comment on the potential options for future service delivery and other aspects of the project.

The Committee considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- VCS groups such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and Volunteer Centre in South Northamptonshire provided good, cost-effective services.
- It was questioned how the proposed hybrid option would differ from continuing the existing mixed approach to delivering the DMA service.
- The hybrid model would be beneficial if it enabled members of the public to be directed to support whether they contacted WNC Customer Services or an external organisation such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- The future service model should link up with the Northamptonshire Children's Trust to bring in sources of support such as milk tokens that were not easy to advertise.
- The hybrid model took more account of the role of external housing providers. However, it would also be important to co-ordinate responses between the DMA service and Northamptonshire Partnership Homes so that cases closed by one did not need to be re-opened by the other.
- The fact that VCS groups were able to use volunteers to deliver services gave them a way of increasing capacity that would not be available to a wholly in-house service.

- WNC should do more to ensure that its approach to pursuing individual debt did not just add to the pressures on people already in difficult financial circumstances.
- The summary of the outsourced option in the report did not include the disadvantage that it would affect the wider capacity of VCS organisations such as Community Law if they lost their role in providing DMA services.
- The report invited the Committee to endorse the transformation plan for the DMA service but did not yet present a sufficiently detailed plan.
- Members of the public were generally more comfortable seeking advice from the CAB than from their local authority.
- It would be important to retain face-to-face services based in communities. Online services alone were not sufficient.
- It would be useful for the Committee to have further information about the breakdown of people seeking advice on debt in West Northamptonshire and about WNC's policy and expenditure on pursuing individual debt.
- The hybrid option would have the flexibility to involve different organisations that were known and trusted in different areas.
- WNC's future approach to the provision of DMA services should be able to reflect different levels of need in different parts of West Northamptonshire. It was a fact that there were several areas in Northampton that were ranked highly on the index of multiple deprivation.
- Future provision of DMA services should offer a reasonable level of access to them in all parts of the authority. Brackley did not currently have a CAB permanently located in the town.
- When members of the public were worried by debt they were often not in a position to think clearly about potential sources of advice and support that might be available to them and could go directly to their local councillor. WNC should take this into account in its approach to debt recovery.
- It could be beneficial for the transformation project to include a working group of councillors and other stakeholders to provide input on this issue. The impact of debt was a key issue for ward councillors.
- Engagement with councillors and other stakeholders in the DMA transformation project should avoid cutting across the existing anti-poverty working group.
- WNC had produced very good public information material on anti-poverty including cards with a QR code directing to sources of support.
- Information about DMA services could be sent out to residents who WNC contacted to recover individual debt.
- It would be beneficial for people to be offered alternatives to pre-paid electricity meters.
- Payment request letters that were set out in a harsh style could have a very negative effect on a person already in a difficult financial situation.
- Current economic pressures could lead more people to need to seek advice about debt who had not been in this position before and so did not know how to access services.

The Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits made the following additional points during the course of discussion:

- The proposed hybrid option gave the opportunity to review the existing DMA service offer, including how WNC worked with the VCS to deliver the best

outcomes and the size of the in-house DMA service team. The hybrid model would also give WNC Customer Services a greater role in dealing with low level cases with an escalation to the in-house team.

- Further information could be provided about relevant areas including WNC's expenditure on Council Tax recovery and people seeking advice from the CAB. WNC Finance also produced monthly reports on debt recovery and related case studies.
- The volume of system-generated letters relating to Council Tax recovery sent by WNC meant that there was a risk of a letter being sent out to someone who could have been dealt with in a different way. However, the process did include checks intended to prevent this scenario, for example, when it was known that benefit payments had been delayed.
- WNC did send out a reminder letter to residents who missed a Council Tax payment. WNC sought to work with residents in arrears on their Council Tax as far as possible. However, it also needed to protect the income that paid for public services.
- The DMA transformation project could include a one-off workshop with councillors to help to inform future work.
- Prevention and early intervention relating to debt in order to avoid individuals reaching a crisis point would be a key part of the new DMA service that the transformation project was intended to produce.

The Assistant Director Commissioning and Performance made the following points during the course of discussion:

- Work was currently being done on debt profiling for the new Local Area Partnerships. Adult social care debt represented quite a large percentage of overall debt being pursued by WNC, although this included legacy debt inherited from Northamptonshire County Council. This could be included in further information provided to the Committee.
- Debt advice was seen as an important part of the overall support available for health and wellbeing.
- Information about DMA services was sent out as part of the process for collecting adult social care debt, although there was scope to set it out in a more user-friendly way.
- More work could be done with councillors to raise awareness of the Breathing Space scheme, which was designed to give people time to get advice and address debt problems.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- a) Noted the progress made to date with the Transformation Project.
- b) Preferred the hybrid option of the four potential options identified for future service delivery.
- c) Requested that an overview of issues relating to individual debt in West Northamptonshire, and the Council's approach to debt recovery, be presented to the Committee at an appropriate future meeting.
- d) Recommended that consideration be given to holding a workshop session for councillors and other stakeholders as part of further work to develop plans for the future Debt and Money Advice service.
- e) Requested that more detailed plans for the future Debt and Money Advice service to be developed be presented to the Committee at an appropriate future meeting.

96. **Report of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health and the Risk of Self-Harm Task and Finish Panel**

The Chair introduced the draft report of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health and the Risk of Self-Harm Task and Finish Panel, highlighting the following points:

- The Task and Finish Panel had spent a significant amount of time on the scrutiny review, beyond the scope originally set, which reflected issues that had emerged as information-gathering progressed.
- The draft report had been shared in advance with the Executive Director People Services and the relevant Cabinet members.
- Recommendations resulting from the scrutiny review would be presented to the WNC Cabinet or to the Integrated Care Board as appropriate to reflect relevant responsibilities.
- Thanks were offered to the councillors who had contributed their time to the scrutiny review and who had heard some powerful testimony. The conclusions from the scrutiny review reinforced some points that might have been anticipated: that more needed to be done to support children and young people's mental health.

The Committee considered the draft report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The scrutiny review appeared to be an excellent piece of work that could also be part of the background information for planned scrutiny work on support for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities.
- WNC's scrutiny report template should set out recommendations together at the front of the report as clearly as possible.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education raised the need to amend a reference in the draft report to a young person who was a former Looked after Child who had given information to the Task and Finish Panel to make this more anonymous.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the report of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Risk of Self-Harm Task and Finish Panel subject to the removal of information which could potentially have identified a former child in care.

97. **Scope for scrutiny of support for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND)**

The Chair introduced the draft scope for the task and finish scrutiny review of support for children with SEND in West Northamptonshire proposed by the Committee, highlighting the following points:

- The draft scope had resulted from a productive preliminary meeting of task and finish panel members.
- It would be important that scrutiny of this topic added value to corporate work already underway and did not impede it.

At the Chair's invitation the Assistant Director Education commented on the proposed scrutiny review, making the following points:

- The draft scope was a good reflection of discussion at the preliminary meeting and the scrutiny work would add value.
- WNC could potentially be subject to an Ofsted inspection in the immediate future. If this occurred the scrutiny review would need to be put on-hold for approximately a month to reflect that service officers would have to focus on supporting the inspection.
- Frontline staff in the areas that would be considered by the scrutiny review were already under pressure: the Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan team were facing a massive volume of requests. The scrutiny review should recognise this by taking a forward-looking and constructive focus to the topic and not going back over old ground.
- The Assistant Director Education would act as the lead service officer for the scrutiny review.

The Committee considered the draft scope. Councillor Roberts expressed concern at the position of the EHCP Team indicated by the Assistant Director Education, which needed to be addressed by WNC and also reinforced the case for the scrutiny review. The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education responded that WNC was already taking action in this area. It was not being suggested that the proposed scrutiny review should be delayed: it could be very beneficial in showing the current situation and options for responding to it. The Assistant Director Education acting as the lead service officer for the scrutiny review would be able to facilitate relevant service officers contributing to the scrutiny review in the context of the overall demand on them.

The Assistant Director Education advised that WNC was not alone in dealing with a massive increase in the number of requests for EHC Plan assessments. It was acting to address this situation, for example, by recruiting education psychologists. However, this involved the challenge of competing with other authorities in the same position.

Councillor Roberts proposed various additions to the draft scope relating to key lines of enquiry and information required and also sought clarification as to whether the reference to seeking views from representatives of parents of children with SEND was intended to mean that this engagement would only involve certain groups. The Democratic Services Assistant Manager advised that the wording in the draft was only intended to reflect that it would not be practical to hear from every parent of a child with SEND in West Northamptonshire. Committee members commented on the importance of engaging parents in the scrutiny review and that they would be able to attend if task and finish panel meetings were held in public as standard. The Committee was advised that there were over 15,000 children with SEND in the authority. The Committee was also advised that the scope set the overall parameters for the scrutiny review and that the task and finish panel would be able to determine the best working methods to use to gather information from the different sources identified.

The Chair subsequently invited the Committee to agree the chair of the task and finish panel, noting that Councillor Barrett had previously expressed an interest in the role.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- a) Agreed the draft scope for the task and finish scrutiny review of support for children with SEND subject to the following amendments:
 - Key lines of enquiry, bullet point 3, add: 'giving specific consideration to the capacity in the EHCP team.'
 - Key lines of enquiry, add: 'Does the new SEND strategy meet key legal requirements?'
 - Information required, background data, add: 'Information on school attendance.'
 - Information required, background data, add: 'Information on current staffing and analysis of future needs'
 - Information required, views from external expert advisers, add: 'Schools/SENCOs'
 - Information required, views from external expert advisers, bullet point 1, remove: 'representatives of'.
- b) Appointed Councillor Harry Barrett to chair the panel.

98. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Chair introduced the report and invited the Committee to consider and confirm the items of business for its next meeting on 24 April 2023. The work programme included Housing Allocation Policy as a potential topic for this meeting. The provision of housing support for refugees was another area identified by the Committee that might be accommodated.

The Chair subsequently raised the potential for the Committee to add to its work programme the use of Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) notices in Northamptonshire. This was a subject that had featured in the national media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another councillor had also raised concerns with the Chair arising from their family experience, including that a residential care home was not able to rescind a DNR notice that was set for a person in a hospital. The Committee could seek further information about local policy regarding the use of DNR notices and the Chair had made preliminary contact with Healthwatch Northamptonshire on this matter. A Committee member highlighted in response that the scenario mentioned could represent a safeguarding issue and should be reported appropriately.

The Committee considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- Councillor Roberts advised that the last meeting of the iCAN Task and Finish Panel on 19 December 2022 had to be cancelled due to illness and other issues affecting participants' availability. A further meeting needed to be scheduled as did a related meeting between her and the Executive Director People Services to discuss the savings that iCAN was intended to deliver for WNC.
- It could be appropriate at this point for the Committee to review its work programme to ensure that it was focussed and deliverable.

The Chair noted that if the Committee looked at its future work programme beyond April it would need to take into account that the prospective changes to WNC's Overview and Scrutiny arrangements could alter the Committee's remit from May 2023.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education suggested that the Committee might consider having an item of business at its next meeting on the fostering service, which would have been inspected in the meantime.

RESOLVED: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

a) Agreed the following items of business for its meeting on 24 April 2023

- Housing Allocation Policy
- Fostering service

b) Noted the updated work programme.

99. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.05 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____